

**Sweet Land of Liberty
July 3, 2011**

**John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

**Psalm 48
Acts 4:1-22
Acts 5:27-29**

**“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”
Acts 5:29 (NRSV)**

**When you have known what it is
To be loved freely,
Submission no longer
Has any taste . . .**

**All the submissions in the world
Are not equal in value
to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of
One single invocation
From a love that is free.**

**Charles Péguy
“Freedom”**

Great and gracious God, in the midst of the joyful noise of this holiday weekend, give us quiet moments to ponder the blessings of this land. Remind us that our being here this morning because we choose to be—that we are free not to be here—is a precious gift. Startle us again with the truth that your people have struggled and fought and died for that freedom we take for granted. Silence in us any voice but your own, and give us courage to hear the word you have for us today; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The great thing about having an iPhone and a lot of grandchildren is that you get a lot of pictures, sometimes every day: first two-wheel bicycle ride, Little League games, first date, senior prom. An absolutely wonderful one came last week of five-year-old Alex. Alex is a beautiful little boy with a smile that melts my heart. So there Alex was holding the handle of his Lightning McQueen rollie suitcase (Lightning McQueen is a talking car and Alex loves him). Alex loves his rollie so much he not only takes it along

when he travels, he takes it with him wherever he goes, and then when he gets there, has it with him all day long. Alex and Lightning McQueen are inseparable. So there he is with that smile on his face and his rollie beside him and, framing Alex and Lightning McQueen, in the background is the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., that magnificent gleaming marble dome, the flag on top fluttering against the brightest blue sky. And standing, remarkably with no one else in the picture, a little boy, a biracial boy, whose birth mother is Serbian and birth father is African American, my grandson.

There was something about that picture—the United States Capitol, the flag, the little boy—that made me think of the hope and promise of this country, this sweet land of liberty.

It's popular these days to disparage Washington, the government, the people who work and live there, but I confess I've loved it since the first time I saw it when I was Alex's age. To this day one of my favorite things in the world is to fly into Washington. The approach is right down the Potomac River, and as the plane descends, you see shining in the sun the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the marble buildings that have been created by us—"We, the people"—over the past 235 years. It thrills me still.

In the Forty-Eighth Psalm, which we read together this morning, a man who obviously loves his country is walking around the walls of the capital city. As he looks to the north, his heart fills with reverence and he exclaims that God is the Lord of all he can see. As he looks inside the wall at the city, his heart fills with love and pride:

Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,
consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will be our guide forever.

As the psalmist was reminded of his nation's deepest faith, so a trip to Washington always reminds me of the core values of our nation: liberty, justice for all, for instance.

Joseph Sittler, professor of theology at the University of Chicago, whom I was privileged to know, wrote in an essay on Appropriate Patriotism:

Before the word *America* can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism. . . . Loving, personal identification with one's own land has never been a breeder of arrogant nationalism. Indeed, a person's love for his or her own land can be the basis of respect for other people's love of their land. Just as only those who have convictions know the meaning of tolerance, so none can assess the land-loves of other people except those who know and deeply love their own. (*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*)

My love for my nation includes gratitude that individual liberty is our core value; that the conscience of the individual is valued so highly that the state itself promises not to violate or abridge it; that freedom to differ and dissent is valued and protected here. That freedom happens also to be at the heart of Christian faith and Christian witness. It is the point where my faith commitment and my patriotism converge.

It's a central biblical tradition. The ancient prophets of Israel were in trouble consistently for criticizing the king, the high priest, the ruling, wealthy elite. Jews and Christians believe that when Jeremiah publically scolds the king for oppressing aliens—i.e., the undocumented immigrants—there is the truth of God in it, and when Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah speak for the poor and vulnerable and criticize the privileged wealthy for not sharing wealth and addressing the needs of the poor, there is the truth of God in it.

Six hundred years after the prophets, followers of Jesus, who himself was executed by the government for sedition, are still in Jerusalem after his crucifixion and resurrection, and they are increasingly in trouble with the authorities. They are publicly saying that Jesus of Nazareth is Christ, Lord, and that sounds like treason to the authorities who believe Caesar is lord. In fact, two of them, Peter and John, are not just saying it privately; they are preaching it anywhere people will listen, and apparently a lot were listening. So they are arrested, flogged, and ordered to stop speaking about Jesus in public. The next day they are at it again, so they are arrested again, brought before the city council, and specifically ordered to stop it. This time Peter says the most extraordinary and revolutionary thing anyone ever said: "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

Dissent, acting on the basis of conscience when it is in conflict with the government, criticizing the authorities, has never been popular. Totalitarian governments understand clearly the danger public dissent presents to their authority. And so, consistently, down across the centuries right up into the present, the first thing a dictator does after taking over the government is to begin restricting freedom by taking over the media, shutting down the

newspapers, radio, television, the wireless network, warning the public dissenters, arresting them, and, if necessary, executing them.

Liu Xiabo, a distinguished Chinese scholar and an outspoken advocate for human rights and democracy, was awarded the Nobel Prize last December. The prize was awarded in absentia, because the awardee was in jail, serving an eleven-year sentence on charges of subversion. With dreary and tragic consistency, from ancient time to modern times, dictators cannot abide public dissent: Hitler, Stalin, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Syria, where today the government is shooting and has killed 1,400 of its own citizens who are expressing their opinions and publically dissenting.

It is our fundamental and most precious liberty, the freedom of individual conscience, the right to free expression, the promise that the government will not only not violate it, but will protect it. And that freedom emerges from one of the most remarkable decisions the founders of this nation made, namely not to establish a national religion and an established church to which everybody, in some way, had to subscribe. An established church was all anybody knew. Everybody knew a nation state had to have its own religion and religious institutions.

But when the thirteen British colonies in 1776 fought for their independence and then went about the difficult task of creating a form of government and writing a constitution that would bring together in one nation thirteen independent colonies, the first right it guaranteed was freedom of religion: there will be no established church or privileged religion here.

Thomas Jefferson and his colleague James Madison came up with the idea that in a democratic state with a religiously diverse citizenry, the only way forward was to guarantee religious freedom for all, and the way to undergird that was to do something no one had done for 1,400 years, since Constantine and Theodosius made Christianity the religion of the empire—namely to favor or establish no one religion. Jefferson was convinced that democracy rests on that basic liberty. When the Virginia legislature was debating the matter of whether Anglicanism should be the state church, as it was in England, Jefferson presented a resolution for religious freedom and no established church. Patrick Henry, of all people, vigorously opposed the idea, arguing that if there were no recognized official church, civil chaos and strife would surely destroy the state. Jefferson prevailed and was so proud of it that he wanted to be remembered for just three accomplishments, which are listed on his gravestone: author of the Declaration of Independence, founder of the University of Virginia, and author of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom (see Franklin Gamwell, “Democracy and the Religious Question,” *Criterion*).

The twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr attributed the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom to a happy accident of history but also the providence of God. Scholars look back at it from the perspective of more than two centuries and acknowledge that the separation of church and state was the best thing that ever happened to both church and state. Both have thrived with the arrangement.

And so efforts to declare that we are a Christian nation, as the Religious Right insists; to try to force God, the Ten Commandments, prayer in the schools is not only misguided; it is simply wrong. The Founders knew it. George Washington said it, in a letter to the Muslim state of Tripoli when U.S. ships were chasing the Barbary pirates and some said it was a Christian attack on Islam: "The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."

The wall of separation, which, by the way, is not in the Constitution but in a letter Jefferson wrote to the Baptists in Virginia, does not mean, as commonly thought, that religion has no role in politics. The Founders wanted no state church and religious freedom for all, but they would be profoundly surprised to know that some conclude that religion has no political relevance. In fact, they knew that a person's religion, his or her deepest values and commitments, inevitably get expressed in how life is lived, how resources are spent, how opinions are formed, and finally how votes are cast. So yes, on all the important issues of the day—how our nation, state, city spends resources; how we relate to other nations; how we educate our young, care for our sick and elderly; how we relate to the stranger, the immigrant—we vote, properly so, on the basis of what we most deeply believe.

In a fine new book, *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America*, James Calvin Davis argues that religion has a critical role in public life and policy. He writes, "In contrast to the hyperindividualism that dominates American culture, religion insists that we think beyond ourselves" (p. 65).

Religion insists that we think for ourselves not only as individuals, but as one—a big, diverse community. Religion insists that how we care for one another, how we extend a helping hand to the poor, the weakest among us, the children, the elderly, is a core value, more important than keeping our taxes low. Religion insists that public officials be honest and trustworthy and accountable. But it also insists that as a people we have obligations, responsibilities, that Christians within the community ought to be the ones advocating for the poor, the marginalized, and, as the Bible says over and over, welcoming the sojourner, the alien, the immigrant.

The temptation of course is to cynicism, to regard politics not as the pursuit of the common good, but the clash of competing self-interests; that politics

is about powerful and wealthy forces that will have their way regardless of what voters think and want; that, for example, somehow in the midst of a deadly epidemic of gun violence, meaningful gun control, in spite of overwhelming popular support, never even gets on the agenda because of fear of the very wealthy and powerful National Rifle Association. The temptation is to cynicism, particularly at this moment in time in the State of Illinois.

People of faith need to remember that human beings are capable of something better than selfishness, self-interest. It is our responsibility to remind ourselves and our society that people are capable of rising above what is good for me to consider what is good for all of us, particularly the weakest, poorest, most vulnerable among us. It is what Abraham Lincoln meant in the midst of the darkest, most dangerous time in our nation's history when he appealed to "the better angels of our nature."

And Lincoln believed, in the midst of a tragic Civil War that was endangering the very existence of the United States, that this experiment in republican democracy, this brief experiment in liberty, was the "last, best hope of earth."

I believe it still. I believe it because disciples of Jesus Christ, my Lord, our Lord, would not submit to the power of an authoritarian state but kept on talking, disturbing the peace. I believe it because of Peter and John, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero, and Nelson Mandela and Lech Walesa, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Chinese dissident, and young Americans who broke Jim Crow laws and paid dearly to dissent from the injustice of segregation and racism and the people of Syria demonstrating on the streets. I believe it because Peter and John, faithful followers of Jesus Christ, when they said, "We must obey God rather than any human being," were laying the foundation for the most revolutionary idea in all of history: freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, liberty.

The psalmist wanted to pass on to the next generation his faith and his love for his country. So tomorrow I will fly the flag. It is, in fact, my father's flag, which I watched him hang on our front porch every year. Now it's mine. And although he doesn't know it yet, I will do it for that little boy with a sweet smile holding onto Lightning McQueen in front of the Capitol building, the inheritor of the hope, the promise.

Sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.

Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King.

Amen.